



EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

Press release

EU-Russia Civil Society Forum held its 4th General Assembly in The Hague on 5-7 October 2013

On 5-7 October EU-Russia Civil Society Forum held its 4th General Assembly in The Hague (the Netherlands). More than 120 civil society actors from Russia and EU member states gathered at the Assembly, including both members of the Forum and organisations having an observer status.

The Assembly addressed the recent developments in EU-Russia relations and concentrated on issues relevant both for EU and Russia civil societies in the sphere of the social situation, civic participation and education, historical memory, the visa regime, the environment, rule of law and human rights, and other fields. While EU member states are gripped by consequences of the economic crisis that is still engrossing the EU, Russia is experiencing the impacts of the crackdown on civic activities curtailing fundamental rights and freedoms and labelling NGOs as “foreign agent”. The Assembly called for an end to the Russian government campaign of pressure on NGOs receiving foreign funds and engaged in international cooperation. Two members of the Forum are being forcefully liquidated because of this campaign, GOLOS and the Kostroma Civic Initiative Support Center, and many more experience judicial and administrative harassment. Dozens of NGOs appealed prosecutors decisions, a few NGOs won their cases and many more continue their hard struggle in the courts.

As recent developments indicate that in many areas the EU and Russia are moving apart, the General Assembly offered a remarkable opportunity to meet and increase networking, exchange views and innovative ideas, evaluate the development of the Forum and tackle the consolidation of its structure and agenda. In a public session on 7 October, relations between the two sides and the outcome of the Forum were discussed with Mr Mikhail Fedotov, Advisor to the President of the Russian Federation and Chairman of the Presidential Council for Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, Mr Vincent Degert, Head of Division for Russia of the European External Action Service, and Ms Daphne Bergsma, Europe Director, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The participants of the session commemorated the murder of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya on 7 October 2006 with a moment of silence and called for justice and an end of impunity in this and other cases of murders of and attacks on journalists and activists.

“We always have to learn from each other. A good example can be traced back to Peter the Great, who came to the Netherlands and applied his knowledge in Russia. I consider it important to increase the number of the Forum members and support dialogue among EU and Russia civil society actors”, said Mikhail Fedotov. Daphne Bergsma underlined “that what the Forum has been doing in past three years is quite impressive. I think for NGOs to meet is very important for dialogue and contribute to develop common understanding. We are supporters of civil society and think that there is a central role to play for civil society”. Mr Vincent Degert claimed that “we wish to establish a new framework agreement with Russia, we expect that the economic relations between both sides will develop, we want to move forward on visa liberalisation and we will continue to financially support NGOs, but this cannot be enough when there is no pressure for modernization from inside”.

During the [sessions of Saturday 5 October](#) the Assembly participants assessed the activities of the Forum since the 3rd Assembly in St. Petersburg (October 2012) through presentation on new members, Steering Committee, Secretariat, Communication Team, Working Groups and Project activities. A series of short statements on strategies and ideas for development of the Forum laid ground for discussions in Working Groups and plenary sessions on the priorities of the Forum for the coming two years, on what questions to tackle and how to concretely address them to tap into full potential of the Forum. In addition, Eva Rybkova

(DEMAS), Stefan Melle (German-Russian Exchange) and Yuri Dzhibladze (Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights) explained the guidelines of the EU call for project proposals on the Forum's development in 2014-15 and launched an exchange of views aimed at advancing discussion on the Forum programmatic and organisational development.

TED-type talks on the financing of NGOs from abroad, on modern city as a civil project, on the new Working Group on 'Historical Memory and Education' and on visa liberalisation were followed by election of the [new Steering Committee](#) of the Forum on [Sunday 6 October](#). Parallel Working Groups sessions included meetings of the existing and two new Working Groups, "Historical Memory and Education" and "Civic Education". The results of the Groups' work were discussed in a closing plenary session, in which the Assembly participants adopted three statements.

The main resolution, "[Connecting Cooperation with Solidarity](#)", called for solidarity actions for member organisations under pressure and urged governments of EU and Russia to address growing social inequality, rise of xenophobia and discrimination and the threat of unlawful access of personal data in the Internet, among other concerns, and called on them to engage in meaningful dialogue with civil society. A statement on "[The Process of Liberalisation of Visa Regime between the EU and Russia](#)" underlined that a speedy adoption of a new agreement on facilitation of the visa regime should be a priority for EU-Russia cooperation in 2014 for the benefit of the public on both sides and that EU and Russia should make adoption of a visa free regime in the nearest future their common goal. A third statement, called "The EU-Russia Forum Demands [Release of Greenpeace Activists and the Environmental Safeguarding of the Arctic](#)", pointed at numerous violations of Russian and international law by Russian authorities who arrested 30 people on the Greenpeace vessel Arctic Sunrise on 19 September after their non-violent action against drilling the Arctic.

Mr Ian de Jong (Netherland Helsinki Committee) drew constructive closing remarks of the 4th General Assembly. In the afternoon of 7 October the Assembly participants visited Dutch civil society organizations in Amsterdam¹ or participated in a roundtable discussion "[Freedom of Speech online in Russia](#)" organised by IREX Europe.

Following the CSF General Assembly in The Hague, on 8 October three members of the Steering Committee, Ksenia Vakhrusheva, Yuri Dzhibladze and Rostislav Valdova, visited Brussels to meet senior EU officials and to participate in a [public event organised by the EU-Russia Centre](#) on the Kremlin's crackdown on civil society.

Detailed information, presentations and pictures on the Forum General Assembly are available on the CSF website at: <http://eu-russia-csf.org/home/general-assemblies/102013-the-hague.html>.

For additional information, please contact us at: info@eu-russia-csf.org.

EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM / ГРАЖДАНСКИЙ ФОРУМ ЕС-РОССИЯ

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¹ Dutch civil society organisations visited by Assembly participants: Amnesty International Netherlands, Anne Frank House, Pink in Blue (police working on LGBT issues), Milieudefensie (environmental NGO), Indische Buurt.

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